

Queen Anne News
Replacing viaduct with tunnel criticized at workshop
By Russ Zabel
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Photo by Rick Levin

A series of three workshops last week on replacing the Alaskan Way Viaduct with a tunnel were supposed to give state and Seattle transportation officials a feel for the public's preference for either a short or a long project timeline.

It's a significant question for the future of a vital, north-south transportation link because, although the shorter approach would be cheaper, the shorter approach ironically would see the viaduct completely closed to traffic for more time than the longer approach, officials said.

"What you tell us tonight will really help," said Linda Mullen from the state Department of Transportation (WSDOT) as she and Patrice Gillespie Smith from the Seattle Department of Transportation (SDOT) took turns talking about the project.

But no one who spoke in a room full of people at a June 22 workshop at the National Guard Armory in Inter-bay talked about that issue. Instead, they questioned the decision to make the tunnel the preferred option in the first place.

One person wondered why the public didn't get to vote on the decision. Another complained that the tunnel would mostly benefit waterfront property owners.

In addition, sign-toting members of Citizens for an Elevated Solution were on hand calling for scrapping the tunnel option; members of the People's Waterfront Coalition were handing out fliers calling for getting rid of a waterfront highway altogether; and a Burien architect was promoting the notion of building a suspension bridge across Elliott Bay to replace the viaduct.

The last two ideas weren't addressed at the workshop, but the first one was. Gillespie Smith stressed that the option to rebuild the viaduct is being carried forward in the planning process as a contingency that would cost \$3.1 billion to \$3.4 billion and take six to eight years to complete. By comparison, the tunnel would cost \$3.4 billion to \$4.4 billion and take seven to nine years to complete.

State Secretary of Transportation Doug MacDonald came forward at the workshop to defend the tunnel option, saying that city and state officials decided that retrofitting or rebuilding the viaduct were not the best ways to spend tax dollars.

"To me, the thing that's better with the tunnel is what it does for the waterfront," he said. Still,

MacDonald conceded, solutions to such a major transportation problem are not pre-ordained. "It may be that the tunnel may not be built."

But he stressed that public involvement in the planning is critical. "We are trying to figure out with you a good answer to a very hard set of problems," MacDonald said.